



Bishop Vital Grandin

Diocese of Mary Immaculate
First Bishop of St. Albert
(Alberta) Canada

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Joseph MORANTO, O.M.I.

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THE SERVANT OF GOD

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Oblate of Mary Immaculate

First Bishop of St. Albert

(Alberta) Canada

Born 8th of February 1829

Died a saintly death

3rd of June 1902



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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Vital Grandin was born on February 8th, 1829, in a beautiful stone house called the "Pelican", a wayside inn built by his father, on the edge of the Sillé Forest in France. However, the Grandin family did not remain there for long. They had already known adversity and misfortune in the past when their farm buildings had been completely destroyed by a violent hurricane. Now, at the "Pelican", things were going poorly. From the beginning his father would not permit any drunkenness or misconduct on the part of the regular customers, nor would he tolerate in his house any visitors of doubtful reputation. Business declined to such an extent that, finally, the family, much to their regret, had to leave and find a home elsewhere. After some time they finally settled in a small market town of Aron, in the Department of La Mayenne. With the years, their family increased, adding to their financial burden. The Grandins, Jean and Marie, had welcomed thirteen children into their home, nine of whom were still living.

Jean, one of the older sons, had already begun his studies for the priesthood and with this extra expense, some way of balancing the family budget

had to be arranged. Frederic, another son, travelled to Paris to look for employment and eventually became a merchant in that city. Of necessity, Vital also had to leave and he made his home with his Uncle Michael, his godfather, who had him watch over his flock and perform other chores which were not above his strength. For this sensitive and exceedingly affectionate child of ten, the parting was most painful. Fortunately, the separation from his parents was for but a short time; and not long after he was able to leave and return home. There Vital made it his duty to help in every possible way; but being so young, he often lacked the necessary strength. Nevertheless, he did willingly everything that he was asked.

But as the years went by, sadness to a marked degree seemed to darken his youthful countenance. Evidently something was troubling this shy and sensitive youth. Vital had his secret, a sincere longing which emanated from a hidden source deep in his soul. Later in life he was to write:

"I had a secret desire to become a priest some day, but with my parents being so poor, I could see no way out. So, after meeting the Brothers of the Holy Cross, I thought that perhaps I could become a brother."

He later joined the Brothers but this attempt at religious life was unsuccessful. Due to a weak constitution he had to leave and return home. Fortunately, his mother was standing by. One day she asked:

— "Would you not like to be a priest like Jean?"

— "Yes, but we are too poor!", answered Vital.

— "You are wrong. We should always depend on God. Look at your brother..", his mother said.

Vital offered no further resistance. Then, spontaneously, a host of kind friends volunteered to help him. Father Garnier, at that time the assistant at the parish church of Aron, agreed to teach him the fundamentals of Latin. Unfortunately, after only few weeks of teaching, this good priest was transferred to another parish. Vital's brother, Jean, then a student at the Mans Seminary, carried on these lessons and assignments. He, along with Sister Anne-Marie from the Carmel, arranged to put the boy in a boarding-house near the Seminary. During recreation periods, holidays, or any spare moments, Vital studied diligently, aided by his elder brother and on occasion by another seminarian. Somehow, Sister Anne-Marie found the money to pay his expenses. At this time, Madame Françoise, a Visitation Sister, was a great influence in the young student's life. It was she who opened the door to his future and saw him admitted to the Bishop's house. She then introduced him to the Bishop and to his secretary, Father Seboux, who was not long in discerning this precious vocation. The young shepherd had unknowingly found his great benefactor, "My good Father Seboux, My Father", as he called him; and who eventually became not only his precious benefactor but an intimate and trusted friend.

It was due to his efforts that Vital, at the age of seventeen, was admitted to the Précigné Seminary in 1846 where he studied for the next four years. Many times during this period the strain of rigorous discipline overtaxed his strength, forcing him at intervals to rest and recuperate. The teachers were very fond of him and repeatedly went on record with praise for him. He had, they declared, a reasonable disposition, was sensitive, very shy, extremely well-behaved and exceptionally good in religious studies. These strongly-marked features had already left their imprint for life on the young seminarian. Therefore, with perseverance, determination, and without deviation, Vital Grandin worked toward the goal of his youthful dream. Some day he would be a priest!

When he was admitted to the Grand Seminary of le Mans in 1850, he was looking forward to eventually becoming a humble parish priest. But as time went by another aspiration was developing in his soul, a thought which at first he rejected, fighting it at its every appearance. It would vanish for a while and he would think nothing more of it; but then back it would come, stronger than ever. The Missions were calling him! Of this he was sure, and he knew that sooner or later a decision would have to be made. This interior conflict about his missionary vocation had started in 1848 and he was destined to wait a period of three long, patient years before the light dawned in his soul and he decided in favour of it. Once his

decision had been reached and the resolution made, nothing could change his mind.

His first year in the Seminary over, he was admitted to the Foreign Missions in Paris in September, 1851. The China Missions held a powerful attraction for his generous heart; most likely because a glorious martyrdom could be had in China for the asking. The Crown of Martyrdom appeared to be within his grasp!

Peace flooded his soul and with happiness in his heart, he pursued his studies relentlessly. The months went by without interference and then, like a thunderbolt from the blue, a calamity was upon him. The Superiors informed him that on account of a minor speech defect, he was unfit for missionary work and would not be accepted. He then had to give up the idea entirely.

Dumbfounded at first, he soon regained his self-control. Strangely enough, formerly he had dreaded the very idea of being a missionary; but clung now to the thought desperately. His only real ambition was to become a missionary and he was determined to and try again. But — where to go? It so happened that a former classmate of his was being admitted to the novitiate of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and it occurred to him that he too could enter. The invitation was extended to him and he accepted.

After a visit to the sanctuary of Our Lady of Victory in Paris, where he prayed fervently, Vital Grandin headed toward the Oblate novitiate at Notre-

Dame de l'Osier; and on December 28th, he took the religious habit. A year later, on January 1st, 1853, he made his religious vows, becoming a full-fledged Oblate of Mary Immaculate. With his days filled with joy and sorrow, hope and apprehension, he continued his journey toward the priesthood. Finally, on April 23rd, 1854, Vital Grandin was a priest.

A short time after his ordination he set out for the distant missions in the Red River district of Western Canada. His heart was suffering to the breaking point when he said goodbye to his relatives, who had travelled to Le Havre to bid him farewell. He must have had a feeling that he would never see them again. In one letter he wrote:

"On the night before leaving, the pain in my heart was boundless. God wanted me to feel the extent of my weakness. Yet, He was my help in this troubling circumstance. What gave me strength was the thought of so many people praying for me, especially my brother. Fortunately, no one realized my heart was suffering to the breaking point."

His first year as a missionary was spent at the St. Boniface Mission with Bishop Taché, and it was there that he received much of his early training. The following year, 1855, his superiors sent him to the most distant mission in the Vicariate, the Nativity Mission on the shores of Lake Athabasca. Here, Father Grandin experienced all the physical and mental hardships a missionary could ever endure:

exhausting journeys, nights spent in the open air in extremely cold weather, hunger and thirst. All these, and heartbreaking loneliness, were his constant companions. Under these trying circumstances, was he really happy? Yes — and no! He was not ashamed to reveal his thoughts in one of his letters:

"Humanly speaking I am not happy; but I submit myself to whatsoever my superior will command. I am happy since I am where the Lord wants me; and here, there is a possibility of making Him known and loved."

The Lord, in His mysterious way, was guiding this young missionary toward a more important vocation. For not long after Father Grandin received a great surprise. As he was about to leave for the wilderness of the Far North to bring the Faith to still unconverted tribes, a letter from the Bishop demanded that he direct his footsteps toward Ile à la Croix. "What could this mean?" he wondered. As communications were slow and mail was delivered only twice a year, Father Grandin would be obliged to wait until the summer of 1858 in order to learn what was in store for him. Then, to his astonishment, he learned that on the previous December 11th he had been named Bishop of Satala and Coadjutor to the St. Boniface Diocese. He was more than astonished; he was dumbfounded. He could not understand it. Vital Grandin — a bishop? Why, only six years ago the Foreign Missions Congregation of Paris had de-

clared him unfit for the China Missions and refused to accept him. Now the Pope was calling him to share in the fullness of Christ's Priesthood as a Missionary Bishop. He — the shepherd of yesterday, the "poor Grandin boy", the shy and sensitive student — a Bishop! Of course, to him there was only one thing to do in the circumstances. He simply declined the honour. He pleaded and even begged to be excused. But Bishop de Mazenod, Superior General and founder of the Oblates, who had personally presented this candidate and wished to consecrate him in Marseilles, refused to listen to his plea. He gave the order that he submit himself to Rome's decision. "Come at once", he wrote, "and please do not put off obeying my orders until after my death!"

Bishop Vital Grandin was consecrated in Marseilles on November 30th, 1859 by Bishop de Mazenod in the presence of a few relatives and friends, Father Jean, Melanie and his protector and spiritual Father "My good Father Sebaux"

For his motto he chose the text "Infirma mundi elegit Deus"; and for his coat of arms — a bent reed, along with the emblem of his Congregation. "It is very simple", he said, "I wanted these to mean something to me, and I think that I have succeeded since I can see in them the story of my life." They were, in fact, a symbol of his short life. The text from St. Paul — "God chooses the weak of this world" — inspired his vocation. Yes, Bishop Grandin, the shep-

hard of yesteryear, the son of poor parents, who had been educated for the priesthood by charity, now showed that by these prime requisites, he was to be the Lord's chosen one.

"The Lord most certainly knows my weakness. If He did choose me, then I must not become discouraged, for I know that, with this honour, God will give me the grace to perform the duties of this office in a worthy manner."

After some time the young Bishop returned to the Far North to lay the foundation of the new Vicariate of Athabasca-MacKenzie and from 1861 to 1864 he led a life of unbelievable hardship. On his numerous journeys, as in past years, he found his former companions the bitter cold, hunger, thirst, loneliness - and in summer, the infernal swarms of mosquitoes. Traveling had become for him a nightmare. On many occasions he narrowly escaped violent death. But there were still other sufferings to be endured which hurt his sensitive heart more deeply - not only the wretchedness of his Indians, but the unjustified opposition of Protestant Ministers and the Hudson Bay Company employees. And he knew poverty! On a certain occasion, the only clothes he had to his name were a well-worn cassock of doubtful colour and a few other threadbare garments. Even the paper he used for his correspondence was given to him by charity. When he handed over the administration of this territory to the new bishop, Mgr. Faraud, he

wrote, "These missions are very close to my heart, since I have suffered so much while there."

Back at Ile à la Crosse, at the Bishop's Residence, he continued his missionary work. Life was no easier than before and travelling was extremely difficult in a country twice the size of France. Again he experienced the same trials and hardships everywhere he went he saw poverty, sickness and unbelievable privations throughout all the Caribou Lake area. In 1867 a fire destroyed the flourishing mission at Ile à la Crosse.

Immediately following this tragic loss, Bishop Grandin prepared to leave for a tour of France where he spent months on end preaching in aid of his missions and asking for support. While in France, he assisted at the General Chapter of his Congregation. He returned to Canada with an even heavier cross because, instead of being Coadjutor-Bishop of St. Boniface, he had become Titular Bishop of the newly-erected diocese of St. Albert, which had been officially established on September 22nd, 1871.

What difficult and complex problems he faced here! With the addition of the western provinces to the Dominion, large numbers of European immigrants arrived to settle the new land. The majority of these proved honest and hard-working but the few undesirables created new difficulties. Immorality and traffic in liquor were rampant. Added to this was the interference of Protestant Ministers, who, well-pro-

vided with funds, were able to impress and so lure away these new Canadians from the Catholic Missionaries. To cope with this matter, Bishop Grandin had only fifteen Missionaries and practically no income. They had to subsist from day to day with whatever their charitable friends sent from abroad. Some help came from the Society of the Propagation of the Faith in Lyons and Paris, alms from France and Québec along with mass stipends. These limited funds were all he had to maintain and expand the Indian Missions, supply the spiritual needs of this new civilization, and establish new parishes, schools and hospitals. Many a time the Bishop, with reluctance, took to the road to beg and beg again.

Another source of trouble gradually developing was the bigotry of some Government officials who openly opposed him. What an ordeal it must have been for this extremely sensitive and apostolic man to make the rounds of Government officials seeking help, to receive in answer only empty "promises" and uncertain "pledges." He knew they were fighting strenuously against the Church and the Catholic Schools; and to his dying day, the Bishop, as he had done in his shepherd days, had to fight to protect his flock.

He was the spiritual father and constant protector of his dear Indians for they needed protection against invaders, troublemakers and from those who tried to convince them to join in the uprising against

the Government. In all their needs, he remained steadfast. The 1885 insurrection, which left behind so much bloodshed almost broke his heart.

With the passing years and an increasing population, events showed again and again the need for more and more priests and sisters. He asked for and welcomed to his diocese of St. Albert many religious Congregations, who came to lend a helping hand to the Grey Nuns. First the Faithful Companions of Jesus, then the Sisters of the Assumption along with the Sisters of the Misericorde. While some apostolic souls came in answer to his request many refused to accept his invitation to help in the missionary field. With all his heart and with all the strength at his command, he unselfishly devoted his efforts to founding a Minor Seminary to provide for future training of priests and religious. Fostering vocations was not just a pious thought, it became almost an obsession and one of the happiest days of his life was when, on March 19th, 1890, he ordained to the Holy Priesthood a Metis, called Father Cunningham.

With the different groups of immigrants who came to the Western Plains from abroad were a group of Ukrainians who needed the Bishop's immediate care. These were the Catholics of the Ruthenian rite from Galicia. Bishop Grandin realized at once the necessity of obtaining for them priests of their own language and rite, who would devote themselves to their spiritual welfare. He wrote many

letters and used all available means to solve what was an important and urgent problem.

As the dear Bishop grew older — prematurely worn out by a life of hardships, travels and cares — he felt that he was not doing justice to his work. More and more the increasing demands and responsibilities weighed heavily upon his heart. He needed a coadjutor. And after much insisting, his request was finally granted in 1897. On June 17 of that year, he was happy indeed in consecrating Bishop Legal in the Cathedral of St. Albert. He now had some one who would share his burden.

The saintly Bishop was overjoyed. Peace flooded his soul. More and more responsibilities were entrusted to his good Cyrenean, the Coadjutor the Pope had given him. As for himself, his only concern now was to prepare his soul to appear before God. But death did not frighten him. On the contrary, he had been thinking about it for a long time and after a life in the service of the Lord, he could and would entrust himself to the mercy of God.

Illness had been his companion for many years, and early in 1902, he suffered a recurrence, this time more violent. He was confined to his room for a while, then was bedridden. The life of the great Missionary Bishop was coming to an end. "We are witnessing the death of a Saint!" thought Bishop Legal, as he assisted the dying prelate. All his life Bishop Grandin had lived for God — and for God

alone — and had tried to die to the world and to himself. Salvation of souls had been his life's obsession and dedication. Once he was heard to say, "How many times have I experienced sorrow in my heart, being fully aware that while souls were lost for lack of missionaries, at the same time knowing that someone, in even the most distant and remote Indian tribes, would be found to salvage every single marten or wolf's tail." For half a century, he had given his all in order that souls be saved.

The last will of this apostle is most revealing and was inspired by a noble and loving heart. Just a few words are quoted here. After rendering homage to his spiritual Mother, the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and all those who had assisted him in his work, Bishop Grandin wrote these words:

"I acknowledge having many shortcomings, but truthfully I can say that my heart is not ungrateful. Ingratitude, nevertheless, is the only reward Congregations and Missionaries can hope for here on earth. It is all we can expect from our poor Indians and from all too many of our Christians, from whom we have a right to be more demanding. But I cannot think of the St. Albert Diocese ever turning against those who, at the price of so many sacrifices, have established it."

After kindly remembering his benefactors: Bishop Sebaux, his brother Jean, Sister Anne-Marie, the "Carmelite", he goes on to say:

"If I happen to die while on the road, my wish is that in order to continue preaching the mystery of Redemption even after my death, a large wooden cross be erected at the camp where I die. No expense is to be incurred to have my remains transferred; my body to be buried at the foot of the cross."

God's Providence did not permit that he would die away from home. The saintly Bishop died in his own modest Bishop's House in St. Albert, with the love and affection of his religious family to comfort him.

After a short agony, Vital Grandin peaceably and piously layed down his pastoral staff and left his flock. "*Infirmus mundi elegit Deus*". The Lord had called His friend, the young shepherd of a few years back, to his eternal reward.

* * *

Will this great Missionary Bishop ever be honoured here on earth as a Saint of God? The decision rests with the Church. The preliminary proceedings for his beatification were begun in 1930 and the diocesan and apostolic proceedings have already taken place. In May of 1967, another important step was taken; the "*Antepreparatoria*" Meeting was called to order in Rome.

May our prayers, through the intercession of Bishop Grandin, obtain from God the required miracles for the official recognition by the Holy Mother Church.

TO HELP FOSTER THE CAUSE OF

Bishop Grandin

Have your friends read this booklet!

To obtain additional copies of this short biographical sketch, write to the addresses mentioned below.

* * *

Pictures of Bishop Grandin with a special indulgenced prayer to obtain his beatification are also available.

* * *

Anyone receiving extraordinary favours through the intercession of the Servant of God, is kindly and urgently requested to send information to either of the addresses below.

* * *

Your offering to help in the expense of promoting this cause will be gratefully accepted.

* * *

All correspondence and inquiries to be addressed to:

OBILATES OF MARY IMM., OF
PROVINCIAL HOUSE,
2112 - 119 STREET
EDMONTON, ALBERTA,
CANADA.

POSTULATION,
GENERAL HOUSE,
VIA AURELIA 229,
ROME, ITALY.

Novena

① God who by the grace of Thy Holy Spirit tempered the soul of Bishop GRANDIN with fortitude and humility and sent him as bearer of Thy lifegiving Word to the peoples of the western plains, grant us grace to be strong in Thy faith, humbly confident in Thine aid and tireless in doing good. And bestow upon us, we humbly pray, through the intercession of this pioneer missionary the special grace which we seek from Thy sovereign goodness in the name of Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.

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† J.H. MACDONALD,

Archbishop of Edmonton

Edmonton, January 18, 1958

Nihil obstat :

Nicolaus FERRARO,

S.R.C. Adressor.

Fidei Sub-Promotor Generalis

die 23 Nov. 1955